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## **The two faces of age identity**

Weiss, David ; Lang, Frieder R

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The Two Faces of Age Identity

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### Abstract

As people grow older they develop a sense of a dual age identity, referring to their age group and generation (Weiss & Lang, 2009). Two studies ( $N_1 = 37$ , 60–85 years and  $N_2 = 104$ , 65–88 years of age) compared and contrasted older adults' cognitive representations of two types of age cohort groups (age group vs. generation). Analyses reveal that age-group identity was more frequently associated with loss and decline, whereas generation identity was more frequently associated with positive characteristics and increased levels of agency. Findings also show that generation identity may – especially in later adulthood – serve as a means to compensate for loss. The self-protective function of the dual age identity and the dynamic and flexible nature of identification are further discussed.

*Keywords:* agency, dual age identity, identity shift, age stereotypes

## The Two Faces of Age Identity

The categorization of self and others is often based on chronological age. Nevertheless, age-based self-categorization provides a source of multiple social identities (Weiss & Lang, 2009). Accordingly, two different modes with reference to aging can be distinguished: On the one hand, thinking about oneself in terms of chronological age may threaten the self due to the salience of negative age stereotypes in later adulthood. On the other hand, thinking about oneself in terms of being a member of a specific generation may play a vital role in later life. This dual age identity is based on individuals' perceived similarities and differences on the basis of age (e.g., Tajfel, 1978). Age-group identity can be conceptualized as a transient group membership related to chronological age (e.g., 60–80 years of age). In contrast, generation identity is a permanent group membership linked to a certain birth cohort (e.g., born between 1920–1940). More specifically, across the lifespan people may change their age-group membership but remain in the same generation.

Former research investigating identity processes focused on individual age identity in the context of the dual process model (e.g., Brandtstädter & Greve, 1994; Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002; Kornadt & Rothermund, 2011). Hence, it is not clear to what extent social identities function as adjustment to age-related threats and adversities. The present research focuses on the adaptive flexibility of age-group and generation identification in later adulthood. The model of the dual age identity (see Figure 1) links two key processes: (1) Older adults avoid self-categorization in terms of old age by psychologically dissociating themselves from their age group; and (2) older adults select alternative age identities by identifying with their own generation (Weiss & Freund, 2011; Weiss & Lang, 2009, 2011). Our research examines (1) the content and function of the dual age identity and (2) the adaptive flexibility of identification in later adulthood.

### Beliefs About Old Age

Subjective beliefs about old age are construed from socially shared representations about the “elderly.” These cognitive representations include thoughts and feelings about different age groups. Stereotypes may be related to the fundamental dimensions of social perception, namely, agency and communion (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Bakan, 1966; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007). Agency is associated with achievement, mastery, and competence, whereas communion refers to warmth, relationships, and cooperating with others. Research indicates

that aging stereotypes often reflect undesirable attributes (Heckhausen, Dixon, & Baltes, 1989; Kite, Stockdale, Whitley, & Johnson, 2005). Negative aging stereotypes include expectations related to physical change which are often associated with experiencing loss of individual agency in later life (Cuddy & Fiske, 2002; Heckhausen & Krueger, 1993). However, older adults are seen as being warm and possessing more communal attributes than younger age groups (Diehl, Owen, & Youngblade, 2004). Thus, positive age stereotypes often refer to communal attributes such as friendliness, warmth, and generativity, while negative age stereotypes are related to competence (“warm” but “incompetent,” see Cuddy & Fiske, 2002; Cuddy, Norton, & Fiske, 2005).

Negative age stereotypes threaten older adults’ sense of self-worth and psychological well-being (Zebrowitz & Montepare, 2000). Paradoxically, negative attitudes toward “the elderly” are prevalent not only in younger adults, indeed they are also common among older adults themselves (e.g., McTavish, 1971). Thus, older adults may in fact maintain and reinforce negative stereotypes about their own age group (Heckhausen & Brim, 1997; Heckhausen & Krüger, 1993; Hummert, Garstka, O’Brien, Greenwald, & Mellot, 2002; Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002). At the same time, they often distance themselves from same-aged people, claiming that they feel younger than their actual chronological age (i.e., age-group dissociation, see Weiss & Lang, 2011). In particular, this holds true when age-group membership is perceived as a negative social identity (Weiss & Freund, 2011).

The present research builds on the assumption that older adults are selective in their perception of the social world and in their adoption of age identities. Research shows that individuals are motivated to adopt identities that positively reflect their sense of self (e.g., Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Biernat, Vescio, & Green, 1996; Mussweiler, Gabriel, & Bodenhausen, 2000; Rydell, McConnell, & Beilock, 2009). An individual’s capacity to selectively identify with positive age identities and to avoid negative age identities is a central facet of adaptive competence. This bias has been shown to serve self-protective functions in later adulthood (Weiss & Lang, 2009). Specifically, the present paper focuses on the adaptive flexibility of age identification in the context of multiple age identities (i.e., dual age identity).

### The Dual Age Identity: Age Group vs. Generation Identity

In contrast to sex or ethnicity, chronological age is a temporary and continuously changing self-aspect. Thus, individuals become members of different age groups across their lifespan and adopt different age-group identities. One alternative conception of age identity

refers to the notion of generation identity (Mannheim, 1928/1952). Similar to age-group identity, generation identity is based on one's membership in a particular cohort. In the present research we argue that age may also form the basis for a positive and meaningful social identity, namely, one's generation. From a social psychological point of view, generation identity is associated with socially shared thoughts about one's lifetime and social conditions. Karl Mannheim (1928/1952) argued that the consciousness of belonging to a specific birth cohort together with shared temporal, historical, and sociocultural conditions transforms a cohort into a generation. Settersten (1999) defines three components of generation identity: First, the relational component addresses the fact that a generational group is always perceived in relation to other generations ("us" vs. "them"). Second, the change aspect points to historical events and changes that shape generation identity. Third, the convoy aspect describes generations as "interactive systems of age peer relationships" that are present across the lifespan (Settersten, 1999). Taken together, this theorizing suggests that generation identity is based on the socially shared experience and interpretation (i.e., collective consciousness) of historical and cultural events and changes. Since cohort group membership is permanent, we argue that generation identity has the capacity to provide meaning, continuity, as well as stability. Older adults may compensate for age-associated deficits by relying on this alternative age identity. Thus, generation identity may provide a basis for positive self-definition, thereby, providing a psychological resource in later adulthood (Correll & Park, 2005; Weiss & Lang, 2009). Nevertheless, there might be also negative representations of one's generation identity (e.g., "Third Reich" generation).

### The Present Research

The present research builds on the assumption that older adults are selective in their perception of the social world and in their adoption of age identities. Although age-group and generation identity are based on a similar group of people (i.e., one's birth cohort), it is hypothesized that older adults hold different cognitive representations about both groups. In later adulthood age-group membership is associated with age-prototypical attributes linked to loss and decline. By contrast, generation identity may provide older adults with a sense of meaning and agency. Thus, older adults may hold more positive representations about their generation than their age group. In order to better understand the underlying mechanism of the dual age identity, two studies were conducted. First, we investigated how older adults shift their self-definition from age-group identity towards generation identity. Second, we focused on older adults' cognitive representation of their age group and generation.

## Study 1

Study 1 tested the idea that older adults shift self-categorization from a negative social identity (i.e., age group) to a positive social identity (i.e., generation). Specifically, since age-group membership poses a threat to the self in advanced age, older adults should shift their identity to a more positive and meaningful age identity, that is, their generation membership. Therefore, we hypothesized that (1) older adults report higher levels of identification with their generation than with their age group; and (2) that when age-group and generation identity are salient at the same time, older adults shift their self-categorization towards generation membership.

## Methods

### Procedure

Participants were asked to respond to a set of questions concerning “identity across the lifespan.” The web-based experiment consisted of a randomized within-subject design that included the factor identity salience (i.e., age group vs. generation). Specifically, participants were asked to think either about their age group or their generation and respond to an identification scale. After participants were informed about the anonymity and confidentiality of their data, they were asked to complete a set of age-identity scales and responded to various demographic questions. Finally, participants were thanked for their participation and provided with detailed information about the research project.

### Participants

Older adults who had previously participated in a research project concerning “aging and technology use,” were invited to take part in this research study via e-mail. Thirty-seven participants took part in Study 1: 11 females (30%) and 26 males. The average age was 67.8 years ( $SD = 5.91$ ). Participants had been born between 1924 and 1949 ( $M = 1941$ ,  $SD = 5.91$ ), and their age ranged from 60 to 85 years. Overall, 13% of the participants had primary education, 18% had lower secondary education, 6% had finished high school, and 63% held a university degree.

## Measures

### Collective Identification

Age-group or generation identification was measured by four items focusing on the cognitive component of collective identity (Weiss & Lang, 2009). Sample items are (1) age-group identification, “I identify with people of my age” and “I feel strong ties with people of my age”; and (2) generation identification, “I identify with people of my generation” and “I feel strong ties with people of my generation.” Responses were assessed on a 7-point scale that was anchored on the left side with 1 (*do not agree*) and on the right side with 7 (*absolutely agree*). Coefficient  $\alpha$  was .77 for age group and .60 for generation identification. The age-group and generation scales were presented in randomized order within each block.

### Identity Shift

To assess the extent to which participants focused on either their age-group or generation identity, 12 items were generated. Four different identity functions were distinguished on the basis of former research (Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Golledge, & Scabini, 2006; Weiss & Lang, 2009) and averaged to create four subscales (see Table 1). In addition, two items examined the time perspective (i.e., past and future) in the context of age-group and generation identity. Responses were assessed on a 7-point scale anchored on the ends with  $-3$  (*people of my age*) to 3 (*people of my generation*), or  $-3$  (*people of my generation*) to 3 (*people of my age*). Notably, the anchoring of the ends (either people of my age or people of my generation) changed randomly; the order did not affect the ratings of the scale,  $t < 1$ .

We assessed covariates that included age, sex, level of education, and a one-item measure of subjective health with a scale ranging from 1 = *very good* to 5 = *poor*, “How would you describe your current health?”

## Results

### Age Group and Generation Identification

A  $2 \times 2$  mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA) with identity salience condition (age group vs. generation) as the within factor and sequence (age group/generation vs. generation/age group) as the between factor yielded a main effect for identity salience condition,  $F(1, 35) = 5.45, p < .05, \eta^2 = .14$ . Consistent with our predictions, older adults’ mean ratings of generation identification ( $M = 4.72, SD = .91$ ) differed significantly from age-group identification ( $M = 4.24, SD = 1.15$ ). The order of presentation had no effect on identification



ratings. Generation identification differed significantly from the center of the scale (4), thereby, suggesting an explicit preference for generation group membership,  $t(36) = 4.75, p < .001$ .

### Identity Shift

The ratings of the identity functions, including affiliation, self-regard, meaning, and agency, were analyzed (see Figure 2). The ratings of these four different identity functions differed significantly from the center of the scale (0) demonstrating a shift toward generation group membership, all  $ts(36) > 3.16$ , all  $ps < .01$ . Next, ratings concerning time perspective were analyzed. There was a significant shift toward generation identity when participants assessed which group would be more closely related to the past,  $t(36) = 5.38, p < .001$ , but not to the future,  $t < 1$ . Moreover, chronological age was positively correlated with shifting the focus on generation identity regarding affiliation ( $r = .29, p = .07$ ), self-regard ( $r = .35, p < .05$ ), meaning ( $r = .34, p < .05$ ), and the past ( $r = .38, p < .05$ ). Thus, the results suggest that advanced age is related to shifting one's identity toward generation group membership on these dimensions.

### Discussion

The findings provide further support for the model of the dual age identity. Older adults identified more strongly with people of their own generation than with people of their age. The experiment revealed a dynamic interplay between identification and dissociation in later adulthood. Thus, results suggest that older adults' self-definition was biased by their generation identity. Specifically, results revealed that older adults shift their self-categorization from their age-group to their generation identity. Importantly, this self-serving bias increased with advancing age. The findings are consistent with the notion of shifting social identities, which has been explained as a self-protective strategy (Mussweiler et al., 2000). Age-group identity might be threatening in advanced age because of the pervasiveness of negative age stereotypes, whereas generation identity might pose a more positive and meaningful social identity. Accordingly, in order to maintain a positive self-image in response to a threatening group membership, individuals shift their self-categorization.

Results also revealed that generation identity served important psychological needs. More specifically, generation identity provided older adults with a sense of affiliation, positive self-regard, meaning, and agency. In addition, older adults' representations of their generation were more associated with the past than with the future pointing to socially shared experience

of historical events and changes. Thus, these findings support the assumption that generation identity more than age-group identity represents a positive and meaningful social identity in advanced age.

## Study 2

The second study examined the different concepts of generation and age-group identity in greater detail. We wanted to answer the following questions: What are the different cognitive representations of age group and generation in later adulthood? How does generation and age-group identity affect older adults' self-definition? Hence, Study 2 focuses on the meaning, content, and function of age-group and generation identity.

Study 2 examined the content and function of cognitive representations of the dual age identity in later adulthood. It applied a free response approach consisting of a sentence-completion task, followed by a group/self adjective checklist, which assessed the extent of self-stereotyping. We tested the hypothesis that older adults hold different representations of their age group and generation. Specifically, older adults perceive their generation identity as more positive and meaningful than their age-group identity. In addition, generation identity is associated with common fate, whereas age-group identity is associated with stereotypical aspects of old age. Concurrently, older adults strongly identify with their generation and less so with their age-group. We predicted that older adults would perceive themselves as less similar to their age group and more similar to their generation. However, the process of identification mediates this relationship of identity salience (age group vs. generation) and the degree to which self-stereotyping occurs. More specifically, we argue that older adults identify more strongly with their generation (than their age group), and that the degree of identification predicts whether older adults perceive themselves in terms of stereotypical group attributes.

## Method

### Participants

An e-mail invitation, which included brief information about the study as well as the study's weblink, was sent to various clubs and societies associated with old age. Participants were asked to take part in a web-based study on "identity and personality." If these organizations were interested in the research project, they forwarded the e-mail with the weblink to their members.

In total,  $N = 104$  individuals ranging in age from 65 to 88 years participated in the study ( $M = 71.3$ ,  $SD = 4.66$ ). Participants had been born between 1920 and 1943 ( $M = 1938$ ,  $SD =$

4.68). Our highly selective sample with respect to new communication technology use was balanced with respect to sex and included 53 males and 51 females. As regards education, 16% of participants had completed primary education (or less), 25% lower secondary education, 10% high school, and 46% held a university degree. Overall, 57% of participants were married, 6% were single, 18% were divorced, and 19% were widowed. The vast majority of our participants, that is, 94% were pensioners and had at least one child (88%).

## Procedure

The present study incorporated identity salience as a between-subject factor. By clicking on the weblink participants were randomly assigned to one of the two identity salience conditions (i.e., age group vs. generation). Participants first read a short introduction containing information about the confidentiality and anonymity of their data. Next, they were instructed to think either about their age group or their generation and to complete five sentences. After the sentence completion task, identity and self-stereotyping measures were assessed. Finally, participants were asked to answer several items assessing information concerning their personality, demographic, and health status.

## Measures

### Sentence-Completion Task

The sentence completion task aimed to record the most salient and accessible thoughts associated with either age group or generation. Participants were requested to complete five sentences that started with (1) “People of my age . . . .” and (2) “People of my generation . . . .” Depending on the identity salience condition, the manipulation read as follows: We would like you to think about people of your age/generation when you complete the following five sentences.

### Collective Identification

Age-group or generation identification assessing the degree of assimilation with others who share the same group membership was measured by using a 4-item scale (Weiss & Lang, 2009). The measure formed a reliable age-group (e.g., “I identify with people of my age,”  $\alpha = .72$ ) and generation (e.g., “I identify with people of my generation,”  $\alpha = .74$ ) identification scale.

## Self-Stereotyping

Based on previous research, 24 traits and attributes associated with old age and aging were selected (Heckhausen et al., 1989; Hummert, 1990; Schmidt & Boland, 1986). Self-stereotyping was defined as similarity between group- and self-ratings of these traits and attributes (Biernat et al., 1996). Specifically, participants completed the self-stereotyping scale, which asks people to make (1) group judgments and subsequently (2) self-judgments. The measure is based on 12 stereotypically positive adjectives (i.e., active, alert, happy, healthy, generous, intelligent, interesting, friendly, assertive, understanding, tough, wise) and 12 stereotypically negative adjectives (i.e., dependent, poor, depressed, lonely, selfish, greedy, complaining, slow, suspicious, weak, stubborn, forgetful) that were mixed and appeared in alphabetical order. Group judgments were made on an 11-point scale ranging from 0% to 100% (i.e., “How do you perceive people of your age/generation? Please estimate the proportion of those people who possess the following characteristics.”). Self-judgments included the same attributes. More specifically, participants were asked to indicate to what extent (1 = *do not agree*, to 7 = *absolutely agree*) each attribute described them (i.e., “To what extent do these characteristics describe you as a person?”). Finally, intraindividual correlations between group- and self-ratings were computed. In order to test mean differences between correlations, the values were transformed into Fisher-Z scores.

## Results

### Data Organization and Content Analysis

In total, participants completed 520 different sentences. In order to categorize the information they provided, we developed a coding scheme on the basis of on identity functions and findings concerning the perception of social groups (e.g., Fiske et al., 2007; Vignoles et al., 2006; Weiss & Lang, 2009). Two independent raters coded the information derived from the sentence completion task by sorting the responses into different categories. The content information was coded on various dimensions using one coding scheme. First, “group-based characteristics” included: (1) physical characteristics (e.g., “sporty” or “frail”), (2) typical behavioral (e.g., “support their children and grandchildren”), (3) personality characteristics (e.g., “open, stubborn, and dutiful”), (4) goals (e.g., “want to stay healthy”), (5) attitudes (“are happy not to belong to younger generations”), and (6) common fate (e.g., “went through hard times”). Second, “evaluative categories” included (1) time perspective (past vs. future), (2) valence (positive vs. negative), and (3) value (agency vs. communion). The two raters coded the responses using a manual that specified these dimensions. The

agreement between the raters was high, Cohen's  $k = .72-.90$ . The first author of this paper resolved any discrepancies between the two raters.

Analyses focused on all of the produced information recorded when participants completed the sentences. In total, participants' descriptions contained 280 (age-group condition) and 240 (generation condition) sentences. In order to compare and contrast older adults representations of their age group vs. generation, we analyzed the mean proportions of the sorted responses. The proportion scores were computed by dividing the number of categorized responses by the total number of responses. Notably, there was some overlap between categories because the produced sentences often contained more than one attribute.

### Analyses of Group-Based Characteristics

Analyses were conducted, in order to compare information associated with (1) age-group and (2) generation identity. A  $6 \times 2$  mixed-model analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted with group characteristics (physical characteristics, typical behavior, personality, goals, attitudes, and common fate) as the within-subject factor, and identity salience condition (age group vs. generation) as the between-subject factor. The analyses revealed a significant main effect for group characteristics,  $F(5, 518) = 6.76, p < .001, \eta^2 = .01$ , indicating significant differences between representations of physical characteristics, typical behavior, personality, goals, attitudes, and common fate. There was also a significant interaction effect between group characteristics and condition,  $F(5, 518) = 5.24, p < .001, \eta^2 = .01$ , that is, participants held different cognitive representations of their age group and generation.

Next, independent  $t$ -tests were conducted to test for single differences between conditions. Results revealed that older adults differentiated between age group and generation with respect to physical characteristics, typical behavior, and common fate. Physical characteristics were mentioned more frequently,  $t(518) = 2.25, p < .001$ , in the context of age group ( $M = .17, SD = .37$ ) than of generation ( $M = .10, SD = .30$ ). Typical behavior was more strongly associated with older adults' age group ( $M = .30, SD = .46$ ) than with generation ( $M = .22, SD = .42$ ),  $t(518) = 2.14, p < .05$ . Furthermore, generation ( $M = .28, SD = .45$ ) more than age group ( $M = .14, SD = .34$ ) was more strongly associated with common fate,  $t(518) = 4.12, p < .001$ . No differences were found between conditions, as regards personality traits, goals, and attitudes. Figure 3 depicts the proportion of older adults' representations concerning group-based characteristics.

### Analyses of Evaluative Categories

Mixed ANOVAs were conducted to test for differences in the proportion of group representations using evaluative categories (time perspective, valence, and value) as the within-subject factors and identity salience condition (age group vs. generation) as the between-subject factor. Figure 4 displays the proportion of older adults' group representations coded for past, future, agency, communion, positive and negative information.

First, a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  mixed ANOVA with time perspective (past vs. future)  $\times$  valence (positive vs. negative)  $\times$  condition (age group vs. generation) was performed. Analyses revealed a marginal interaction effect between time perspective and condition,  $F(1, 518) = 2.94, p < .08, \eta^2 = .01$ . Simple effect analysis indicate that representations linked to generation were more frequently associated with the past ( $M = .26, SD = .44$ ) than to age group ( $M = .14, SD = .35$ ),  $t(518) = 3.56, p < .001$ . In addition, there was a significant interaction effect between valence and condition, indicating that older adults perceived their generation as more positive ( $M = .67, SD = .47$ ) than their age group ( $M = .57, SD = .49$ ),  $F(1, 518) = 9.85, p < .01, \eta^2 = .02$ .

Second, a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  mixed ANOVA with Value (agency vs. communion), Valence (positive vs. negative), and Condition (age group vs. generation) was performed. Analyses yielded a significant interaction effect between Condition and Value,  $F(1, 518) = 13.4, p < .001, \eta^2 = .03$ , evidencing that older adults perceived their age group ( $M = .26, SD = .44$ ) more in terms of attributes related to communion than their generation ( $M = .17, SD = .38$ ). Additionally, older adults' representations of their generation ( $M = .36, SD = .48$ ) were more strongly associated with agency, as opposed to their age group ( $M = .23, SD = .43$ ).

### Content and Function

Analyses revealed that chronological age was positively related to generation identification ( $r = .35, p < .001$ ) but not to age-group identification ( $r = -.05, p = .18$ ). Consistent with findings from Study 1, a significant effect was found for older adults' identification ratings with their age group ( $M = 4.17, SD = 1.16$ ) compared to the identification with their generation ( $M = 4.77, SD = 1.15$ ),  $t(102) = 2.65, p < .01, d = .52$ . Furthermore, the mean ratings of generation identification by older adults differed significantly from the center of the scale (4),  $t(47) = 4.66, p < .001$ . In sum, these findings demonstrate that older adults strongly identify with their generation. In a further step, we analyzed the self-stereotyping scale of the 24 adjectives including 12 positive and 12 negative attributes. Positive and negative attributes were averaged to create a scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha_p =$

.86, and  $\alpha_N = .87$ , respectively). A  $2 \times 2$  mixed ANOVA with Valence as the within-subject factor (positive vs. negative attributes) and Condition as the between-subject factor (age group vs. generation) revealed a main effect for Valence,  $F(1, 518) = 45.7, p < .001, \eta^2 = .31$ . This indicates that the groups were perceived more positively than negatively. There was also an interaction effect between valence and condition,  $F(1, 518) = 4.66, p < .05, \eta^2 = .04$ , in that generation was associated with more positive attributes than age group. Analyses showed no group differences pertaining to negative attributes.

#### Self-Stereotyping: Self Group Similarity

In a second step, the goal was to analyze whether older adults self-ascribe group-based attributes. Based on the notion that self-stereotyping indicates self-ingroup similarity (Turner, 1984), an index was computed that illustrates the overlap of group representations and self-perception. Specifically, within-participants correlations between group-ratings and self-ratings were conducted. These intraindividual correlations including group- and self-judgments were compared between conditions. In order to analyze intraindividual correlations between group- and self-ratings, we transformed the correlations acc. to Fisher's Z. Analyses revealed a significant effect for condition,  $t(102) = 1.99, p < .05$ . In detail, self-stereotyping occurred more frequently in the context of generation identity ( $M = .60, SD = .46$ ) than of age-group identity ( $M = .40, SD = .51$ ). In other words, older adults perceived themselves as being more similar to their generation than to their age group.

#### Testing the Mediating Role of Identification: Self-Stereotyping

Furthermore, it was tested whether or not group identification mediates the effect of identity salience on self-stereotyping. Accordingly, older adults should define themselves more in terms of their generation group membership when they strongly identify with their generation. However, it seems also more likely that older adults dissociate themselves from their age group in order to avoid a self-definition in terms of their age group.

To examine this model, we performed a series of regression analyses (Baron & Kenny, 1986) with self-stereotyping measure as the dependent variable. Intraindividual Fisher's Z transformed correlations were included in our further analyses. The association between the identity salience condition (coded as  $-1 =$  age group and  $1 =$  generation) and identification was found to be significant ( $\beta = .31, p < .01$ ). Additionally, group identification was positively related to self-stereotyping ( $\beta = .44, p < .001$ ). Consistent with the mediation hypothesis, the results indicate that the link between identity salience and self-stereotyping ( $\beta$

= .19,  $p < .05$ ) disappeared and became nonsignificant when identification was added to the regression equation ( $\beta = .01$ ,  $ns$ ). The process of identification fully accounted for the effect of identity salience on the degree to which self-stereotyping occurred (Sobel's  $Z = 2.34$ ,  $p < .02$ ). In other words, older adults defined themselves as being more similar to people of their generation because they strongly identify with this group.

## Discussion

Study 2 focused on two goals: first, to explore differences in older adults' cognitive representations of age-group and generation identity; second, to examine these representations as part of older adults' self-concept. Overall, the findings are in accordance with the model of the dual age identity. The analyses showed that older adults' cognitive representations of age-group and generation identity differed significantly on various dimensions. Consistent with our hypotheses, it was found that older adults perceived "people of their age" in terms of prototypical characteristics associated with old age. Descriptive analyses revealed that these representations included information concerning physical characteristics (e.g., "frail") and typical behavior (e.g., "exercise in order to stay healthy"). In contrast, older adults' representations of "people of their generation" were considered more in terms of common fate (e.g., "we went through hard times together"). Generation identity was strongly associated with positive characteristics and thoughts about the past. Age-group identity tended to be more frequently associated with communal attributes, whereas generation identity was more frequently associated with agency. Thus, our results support the theory that age-group membership is linked to stereotypical perceptions about old age. Older adults themselves perceive their age group as possessing more communal and less agentic attributes. Accordingly, age group was associated with low levels of agency and higher levels of communion, typically reflecting a perception of relatively low status ("doddering but dear," Cuddy & Fiske, 2002). By contrast, perceiving generation group membership may constitute an alternative compensatory age identity that provides older adults with a sense of agency. Analyses of group-ratings also reveal that older adults perceive their generation as more positive than their age group. Importantly, older adults' definition of themselves was in line with their representation of their generation identity. Attributes that were perceived as typical for their age group did not exhibit such a strong effect on older adults' self-definition. Older adults might be more likely to dissociate themselves from their age group by reducing the similarity between themselves and their age peers. Furthermore, the effect of identity salience on self-stereotyping was, indeed, mediated by their level of identification. This suggests that



the activation of generation identity in older adults increases the identification with this group, which in turn, leads to higher levels of self-stereotyping.

Limitations of Study 2 relate to the problem of common method variance of the identification and self-stereotyping measure concerning the mediation analysis. The observed associations between the two constructs might be due to systematic effects relating to the similarity of the two measures. However, social identification assesses the degree of assimilation with others who share the same group membership, whereas self-stereotyping measure assesses the link between group representations and self-perception. Thus, from our perspective collective identification is an important route to self-stereotyping but does not represent the same process.

### General Discussion

Consistent with the notion that collective identities are a source of self-interpretation and self-definition (Simon, 2004), the current research demonstrates that one's birth cohort builds the basis for a dual age identity in later adulthood. Thus, older adults maintain two age-associated identities: their age group and their generation. But the results suggest that older adults hold different cognitive representations about their age group and their generation. The dual age identity entails different consequences for self-definition in advanced age. First, Study 1 demonstrates that older adults identify more strongly with their generation than with their age group. Results from Study 1 also suggest that older adults shift their self-categorization toward generation identity on important identity functions when both age identities are salient. Second, Study 2 replicates findings from Study 1 showing that older adults report higher levels of identification with their generation than with their age group. In addition, Study 2 demonstrates that older adults have different cognitive representations of their age group and generation. Generation identity is more strongly associated with positive characteristics, agency, and common fate, whereas age-group identity is related to less positive characteristics and more communal and physical characteristics. Finally, the findings of Study 2 suggest that generation identity is more likely to contribute to older adults' self-definition and interpretation. The data suggest that older adults were more likely to define themselves on the basis of their generation identity than of their age-group identity. Specifically, older adults increased the similarity between themselves and their generation while differentiating themselves from their age group. This dynamic interplay of identification and dissociation supports the idea of the adaptive flexibility of age identification in the context of aging.

One important implication of these findings points to the conceptual difference of age-group and generation identity. Our data suggest that older adults perceive members of their age group sharing common physical and behavioral characteristics. Older adults categorize their age group along common age-stereotypical characteristics (Cuddy et al., 2005) including reduced levels of agency and increased levels of communion. Generation identity, on the other hand, consisted not only of perceived similarity among its members, but was associated with a perceived interdependence among group members. Specifically, pondering about one's generation was linked to positive characteristics associated with agency. Yet, generation identity may entail negative representations about one's group in the past. For example, generation identity might be associated with collective guilt pointing to harm committed against other groups (Branscombe & Doosje, 2004).

Generation membership was strongly linked to the perception of a common fate, which points to the perception of a shared destiny ("Schicksalsgemeinschaft"; Mannheim, 1928/1964; p. 547). Of course, this perceived interdependence may turn a cohort into a generation by creating a sense of collective consciousness. One possibility is that this interdependence among group members develops across the lifespan (see Holmes & Conway, 1999). By experiencing generation belonging, older adults may have drawn upon their lifetime and stressed the significance of shared experiences of events, as well as changes within their age cohort. Consequently, generation identification has the potential to reinforce older adults' perception of continuity, providing meaning and a sense of personal agency.

The present research demonstrates that social identity enables older adults to cope with aging-related changes and fosters a positive image of the self. Our results emphasize the adaptive role of the dual age identity that serves as compensatory mechanism in advanced age. Specifically, negative age stereotypes associated with age-group membership may lead older adults to select alternative age identities by identifying with their generation. The shift in self-categorization from age-group identity to generation identity can be conceptualized as accommodative flexibility in coping with age-related losses and constraints (Brandtstädter & Greve, 1994; Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002). More specifically, aging-related changes may account for this shift in self-categorization in later adulthood. Thus, self-regulation takes place not only at the individual level, but also at the collective level of self-definition. Accordingly, it seems important to consider the dynamic interplay of individual and social identity processes across the lifespan.

Consistent with previous studies on avoidance and disengagement in coping with negative social identities (Arndt, Greenberg, Schimel, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2002;

McCoy & Major, 2003; Nussbaum & Steele, 2007), the present research suggests that older adults were able to circumvent the negative consequences of their age identity. Specifically, through age-group dissociation, older adults were able to prevent themselves from permitting negative images of aging to become self-defining. Similarly, O'Brien and Hummert (2006) found that memory performance in older adults who disidentified from their age group was less depleted by stereotype threat effects. Moreover, Wrosch and colleagues argue that disengagement entails beneficial consequences by protecting the self (Wrosch, Scheier, Carver, & Schulz, 2003; Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, Schulz, & Carver, 2003). Although the current research demonstrates that disengagement in terms of psychological dissociation proves to be a successful strategy in dealing with a negative age identity in later adulthood, this strategy may also undermine older adults' self-continuity. This is in accordance with Wrosch, Scheier, Carver et al. (2003) notion that disengagement appears to be an adaptive response when "alternatives are attainable." In other words, successful development can be characterized by the dynamic relationship of disengagement and reengagement. Consistently, the present research demonstrates that older adults draw upon alternative age identities when dissociating from their age group. Thereby, alternative social identities (i.e., generation) provide older adults with a compensatory means for self-definition and therefore may promote successful development.

Limitations concern the cross-sectional nature of the current studies and the selectivity of our samples. First, some cohorts may have experienced more significant and critical life events than others. This, in turn, could have led to an increased perception of common fate and feelings of belongingness. Second, the sample of Study 1 and 2 were highly selective with respect to internet use and membership to certain social clubs. Thus, future research needs to replicate these findings with different subgroups of older adults that are, for example, not familiar with the internet.

To summarize, the two studies presented in this paper provide consistent support for the argument that the dual age identity is represented in different ways in older adults. These collective representations become incorporated into older adults' selves and contribute to self-definition and self-perception. Accordingly, generation identity poses a positive and meaningful identity in later life. Generation identity was perceived as more positive and served as the basis for the self-definition used by older adults. In contrast, age-group identity was associated with stereotypical images of old age. These results highlight conceptual differences of the two age-associated identities. Taken together, the present research

demonstrates that older adults' self-concept and self-image depend on their representations of the groups that they believe they belong to and feel associated with.

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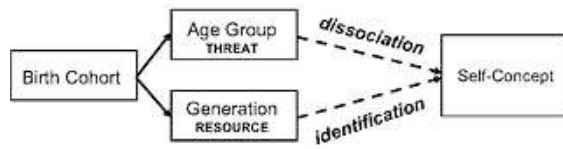
Table 1

*Sample items of the identity shift measure in Study 1*

Identity functions	Content	Sample item	Consistency <sup>a</sup>
Affiliation (2 items)	connectedness and belonging	"To which group do you feel a stronger sense of belonging?"	.90
Self-regard (3 items)	self-definition & centrality, self-esteem	"Overall, which group is a more important part of your self-image?"	.94
Meaning (3 items)	continuity and meaning	"Overall, which group is more important to learn who you are?"	.76
Agency (2 items)	efficacy and mastery	"Which group do you associate with higher competence?"	.82
Time perspective	past and future	"Overall, which group is more associated with the past/future?"	–

*Note.* <sup>a</sup>Consistency refers either to correlation coefficients for 2 items or to Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for 3 items.





*Figure 1.* Model of the dual age identity in later adulthood.

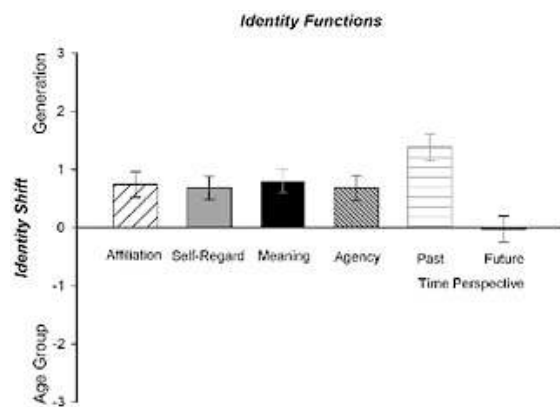


Figure 2. Mean evaluations of identity functions including affiliation, self-regard, meaning, agency, and time perspective in Study 1.

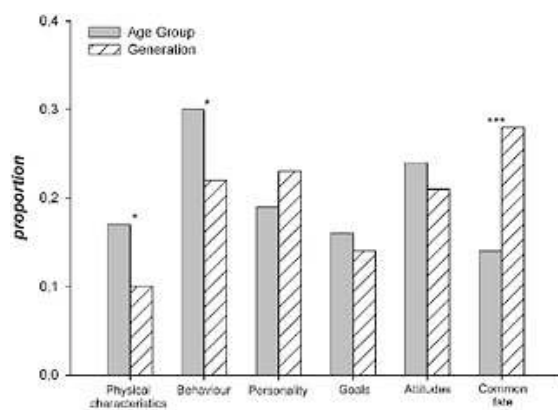


Figure 3. Proportion of older adults' responses across group-based characteristics by identity salience condition in Study 2. Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

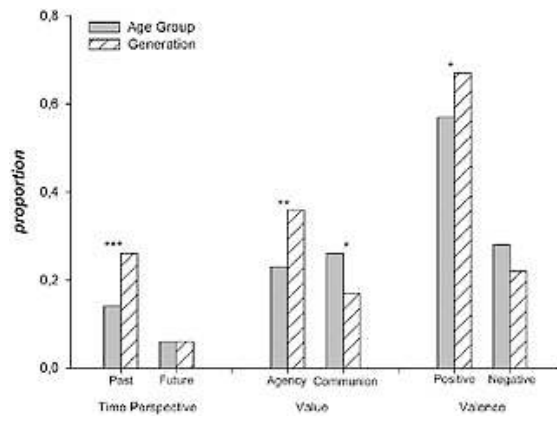


Figure 4. Proportion of older adults' responses across evaluative dimensions by identity salience condition in Study 2. Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .